

MBTA Communities Working Group

May 23, 2023 Minutes

Attending: Mette Aamodt, Vincent Baudoin, Rebecca Gruber, Shaina Korman-Houston, Kin Lau, Sanjay Newton, Stephen Revilak.

Staff: Teresa Marzilli, Claire Ricker

Review and discussion of open meeting law

Ms. Ricker had a conversation with Town Counsel about open meeting law, and the handling of draft documents. Town Counsel's advice is that any group that has the appearance of a committee should be treated like a committee for the purposes of open meeting law, and this includes the MBTA Communities Working Group. A gathering of five or more members for the purpose of discussing working group business will constitute a quorum, and draft materials should be clearly labeled as "DRAFT" to avoid having the appearance of final work products.

Review and Discussion of Preliminary Draft Maps

The working group decides to adopt a more formal structure. Mr. Newton will serve as group chair, and Mr. Revilak will serve as secretary.

Ms. Ricker suggests releasing the MBTA Communities survey results for the June 8th meeting, as feedback from the surveys significantly influenced the first iteration of maps.

We have a "go-round", where working group members provide feedback on the draft maps for the first iteration.

Mr. Newton would like to see the V2 East Arlington sub-district move west, so it's further away from Alewife Brook, and anchored more around Capitol Square. He'd like to see the Arlington Center sub-district extend south to Gray Street, and the Arlington Heights sub-district extend up along Park Ave.

Mr. Lau encourages working group members to think long term -- how things will take shape over the next 50-60 years. He doesn't believe we should focus too heavily on the MBTA's current level of service, as that can change over time.

Mr. Revilak reviewed Cambridge's Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment. By their modeling, a 100-year sea level rise/storm surge event in 2070 will have a flood elevation of just over 11' at the Alewife T station. He'd like the multi-family districts to be located above this elevation. He believes the Arlington Center sub-district was a good area to include, and agrees with extending the Arlington Heights sub-district up Park Ave.

Ms. Korman-Houston disagrees with Mr. Lau's position on MBTA service; she believes that bus routes will attract development. She'd like the East Arlington sub-district to emphasize Mass Ave. as the gateway into Arlington, and she's interested in hearing Utile's thoughts about how the flood plains might change over time.

Ms. Aamodt recommends a holistic approach, and moving forward with an end goal in mind. She'd prefer a cluster approach that emphasizes Arlington's three commercial centers.

Ms. Marzilli would like to support businesses, access to public transportation, and sustainability.

Mr. Baudoin would like the working group to articulate something bold. He'd prefer districts that are oriented around transit, encourage mixed use, allow the next increment of development, and fill in the gaps between our current piecemeal business districts. He offers a corridor-based design, which was inspired by the town's 1946 zoning map.

Ms. Gruber wondered about housing outside of the main corridors, e.g., around the town's desirable parks. She'd like to ensure we involve the town's decision makers and integrate the community into this process.

Mr. Newton thinks we had good forums in November and March, and notes that over 1000 people responded to the survey. That's brought us to where we are today. We'll hear more going forward, and that will guide future work.

Ms. Marzilli tells the group that a number of community organizations are interested in seeing the requirements of Section 3A move forward.

Mr. Lau reminds the group that the main goal of Section 3A is about providing capacity for future housing production. He thinks the secondary goals are nice, but we shouldn't lose sight of the primary one.

Maps and Public Outreach

Members of the working group spend the next 30 minutes (approximately) having discussions in sub groups. One sub-group focuses on the maps, while the other focuses on the June 8th public forum. Sub-groups provide report-outs to the entire working group.

The mapping group was unable come to consensus on a concrete set of map changes to suggest. However, there was a general desire to allow multi-family housing with more than three dwelling units.

The public forum group offers the outline of an agenda for June 8th. Assuming 90 minutes, they propose:

- Opening presentations (20 minutes). Presentations would cover multi-family zoning requirements for MBTA Communities, the first iteration of maps, and the goals for table exercises. Opening presentations should be given by working group members.
- A table mapping exercise (40 minutes). The mapping exercise would be done in small groups.

- Report out (20 Minutes). Each small group would provide a summary of their conversations and conclusions.

In addition to mapping exercises, small groups can be given a set of questions to discuss and answer. These questions would highlight some of the choices we have to consider. For example:

- Height. Buildings require elevators at four or more stories, and this provides an environment where residents can age in place. Residents will have to navigate stairs at three stories or less.
- Number of units and affordability. Arlington's inclusionary zoning applies to buildings with six or more residential units. Allowing buildings at that scale creates the opportunity for affordable housing. Allowing fewer than six units by right means no affordable housing.
- Size. Arlington recently voted to adopt the state's specialized stretch building code. Above a certain number of square feet, multi-family housing is subject to higher energy efficiency and sustainability requirements. Allowing multi-family buildings of that size creates the opportunity for more sustainable energy-efficient homes. Requiring smaller buildings implies a lower sustainability standard.
- Commercial Vitality. According to Utile, it takes roughly one household to support 30 square feet of retail; a 3000 square foot retail establishment needs around 100 households to support it. Allowing more homes creates the opportunity to support more vitality in our business districts. Allowing fewer homes limits the opportunity for that vitality.

Finally, we have the opportunity to leverage outreach strategies from past efforts. For example, the Arlington Heights Neighborhood Action Plan report contains a section on table mapping exercises; outreach for the Sustainable Transportation plan utilized a survey tool where participants made comments on a map; and, the City of Boston used postcards to gather feedback when developing on their 2030 Master Plan.

Next Steps

The May 30th meeting will focus on planning for the June 8th public forum. Working group members are encouraged to think about questions that illustrate the tradeoffs we'll have to consider for our multi-family district.

Ms. Marzilli has creates a flier for the June 8th forum, and she encourages working group members to distribute it.

Documents Reviewed

During the meeting, working group members examined or discussed the following documents:

- Draft maps titled "V1" and "V2", provided by Utile
- Tracing paper concept drawing (draft), provided by Ms. Aamodt

- A Strong Towns proposal (draft), provided by Mr. Baudoin